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ABSTRACT

Potential clients for centralized school district organizations with formal responsibilities for research and evaluation include societies, federal and state governments, boards of education, superintendents, other administrators, principals, and teachers. Not all clients are equal. An historical review of the evaluation literature supports the proposition that some research and evaluation unit (R&E) clients are served more directly than others; that this service to particular clients is in response to their demands; and that service to all clients is shaped by the demands of the most direct clients. Historically, superintendents were the most directly served clients; in responding to their administrative needs, R&E units engaged primarily in data collection activities. Despite federal and state evaluation requirements mandated by the Elementary and Secondary Act R&E units may still be engaged primarily in data collection activities (such as the reporting of norm referenced test scores) rather than in evaluation activities. It is likely that instructional clients such as teachers and project directors will be less directly served than administrative clients. (Author/CP)

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IMPLICATIONS OF CLIENT DEMANDS FOR R&E ACTIVITIES

by

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Implications of Client Demands for R&E Activities

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There are a number of potential clients for centralized school district organizations with formal responsibilities for research and evaluation. They include society, federal and state governments, Boards of Education, Superintendents, other administrators, principals, and teachers. But not all potential clients are equal. A review of the evaluation literature supports the proposition that some Research and Evaluation unit clients are served more directly than others, that this service to particular clients is in response to their demands, and that service to all clients is shaped by the demands of the most direct clients.

Unit Clients to 1965

In order to understand the current relationships of an R&E unit to its clients, it is useful to trace the development of these organizations. Between 1910 and 1920, a number of large city school districts first established research offices. These offices were generally established by the district Superintendents who were responding to demands from the public for efficient operation of the schools. This was in the era of scientific management, when American society was saturated with the idea of efficiency. Education was under attack by the popular journals, and Superintendents were particularly vulnerable to public opinion and pressure. The job security of Superintendents was so tenuous that in 1913 the editor of the American School Board Journal reported that "there has been a perfect storm of unrest culminating in

wholesale resignations, dismissals, and new appointments."[1] Administrators began to respond to demands to apply to schools the efficiency procedures that were being used in industry. One of these procedures was the survey. Administrators hired outside schoolmen, ostensible educational experts, to survey current conditions in the district. These surveys generally focused on collecting fiscal information, especially salary information, facts about district size, rate of growth of the population, and building assessment and needs. The purpose of the surveys was to collect facts to serve as a means of defense against criticsm from without. Time after time, the recommendations based on these surveys included forming a central office bureau, often called an Efficiency Bureau, to provide on-going information about the district to the Superintendent. Superintendents were favorably inclined to act on this recommendation, and often did form such bureaus. The forming of some bureaus, which began using surveys, paired with the continued use of external consultants who also surveyed districts, combined to serve as another factor in the growth in numbers of the Efficiency, or Research, Bureaus. Because the surveyors gathered information from outside districts as well as their own, the surveys themselves created a demand for the formation of new bureaus in order to respond to the surveys. Thus a vicious cycle of surveys leading to the formation of bureaus leading to more surveys was established. An example which shows that this influence on the development of bureaus is not exaggerated is the New York City bureau, which, in the three-year period of 1921-1924, responded to more than 100,000 queries.[2]

Another influence on the formation of city research bureaus was the testing movement. Rice, Stone, Courtis, Binet, and Thorndike had developed tests in the first two decades of the 19th Century, which were picked up

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[1] Vol. XLVI, p. 28

[2] Chapman, Harold Benjamin. Organized Research in Education With Special Reference To the Bureau of Educational Research. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 1927, p. 89.

by bureaus in districts which were anxious to determine the status of students, and to compare that status with students in other districts. Some districts formed bureaus expressly to use available tests and to develop new tests or scales or rating sheets or anything else that would seem to provide tangible evidence of efficiency.

So, the numbers of these central office research bureaus grew, from the first established in 1912. By 1915 there were enough research bureaus in cities and universities to permit the formation of the National Association of Directors of Education Research (which since 1922 has been known as the American Educational Research Association), and also the separate formation of the National Society of Efficiency Men. By the early twenties, there were sixty-nine city research bureaus,[3] by 1930 there were one hundred and nineteen, and by 1937 there were two hundred and sixty.[4]

Most of the bureaus were established expressly to provide district information to the Superintendent, and sometimes also to the School Board. Not only was the Superintendent often responsible for the bureaus' beginnings, but the heads of these bureaus generally reported directly to the Superintendent, and the Superintendent initiated most of the requests for actions that the bureaus took. Consequently, the client most directly served by the new Research Units was the Superintendent. This meant that the activities that the bureaus could perform for other clients, such as teachers or society, were generally restricted to those which would first serve Superintendents, and then secondarily serve others.

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[3] Ibid, p. 19.

[4] Witsky, Jonas. "The Organization and Functions of City School Research Bureaus," American School Board Journal, Vol. 96, April 1938, p. 25.

The activities that city research bureaus engaged in through the early 1960s continued to be dominated by the kinds of data collection activities which characterized the earliest units. Studies conducted to identify the functions and activities of these bureaus during each decade from the 1920s to the 1960s almost uniformly echo a statement made in one of the earliest surveys that "...these bureaus are devoting their entire energy to forms of technical service other than research."[5] An early survey, conducted in the twenties, showed that the most frequent bureau activities were achievement testing, mental testing, and classification.[6] A study conducted in the 1930s identified the most frequently reported bureau activities as the preparation of reports, achievement testing, guiding research studies, and mental testing.[7] Meanwhile, the official titles of these units were expanding to cover a range of terms in addition to research, such as testing, curriculum, statistics, child study, and guidance.

A 1945 investigation of city research bureaus determined that the sampled bureaus spent around 30% of their time conducting testing programs, about 29% compiling statistical reports and records, and 18% rendering reference, information, and publicity services.[8] Efficiency was still an administrative goal being served by city bureaus in the 1950s. One ardent bureau supporter wrote: "The administrator who expects to keep his school system up to the

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5 Scates, Douglas E. "Training for Research in the Light of Field Requirements," Elementary School Journal, 33:96, October 1932, p. 97.

6 Chapman, op cit, p. 173.

7 Witsky, op cit, p. 26.

8 Liu, Bangnee A. Educational Research in Major American Cities. New York: King's Crown Press, 1945, pp. 48-73, 88-89.

level of efficiency that is being sought by industry, by government, by agriculture, by the armed forces, and by other large groups will take steps to procure, expand, and safeguard those parts of his organization that can provide these vital services."[9]

The post-World War II era was characterized by the continued growth in the number of school district research units. Their scope of activities paralleled that of earlier units, including responsibilities in the areas of tests and measurement, surveys, publicity, student accounting, guidance, and the preparation of salary schedules and budgets. As before, routinized activities consumed a major portion of the time of these organizations which were nominally responsible for research.

The client most directly served by research units remained the Superintendent. Studies conducted through the early sixties indicate that the majority of the unit heads reported directly to the Superintendent, and that the Superintendent or his cabinet generally determined unit priorities. Edith Mosher, in summarizing studies of the units to 1967 observed that a unit's effectiveness "depends almost entirely on services rendered to, and supports and approval received from, immediate supervisors."[10] Consequently, most of a unit's efforts were in direct response to administrative demands. Rarely were units able to set their own agendas. Most of the studies of research offices indicate that unit personnel did consult with school

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[9] Scates, Douglas E. "We're in a New Era of Public School Research," Nation's Schools, Vol. 47, 1951, p. 33.

[10] Mosher, Edith K. What About the School Research Office? Berkeley: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1966, p. 43.

staffs upon request. Seldom, if ever, did they take any initiative, however, in addressing instructional clients.

Unit Clients After 1965

The context in which district-based research offices operated changed in the mid-sixties, when Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Through this act, the federal government took on heavy fiscal responsibilities in local educational efforts for the first time by providing for thousands of federal grants to local educational agencies. Associated with many of these grants were provisions requiring the evaluation of programs developed with federal funds. The new evaluation responsibilities were often assigned to existing district research units and, as one study put it, had an "almost explosive impact" on these organizations.[11] This external stimulus to local educational research activities resulted in expanded workloads, research staff reorganizations, and the creation of new positions within existing organizations. Additionally, many research organizations were newly created, particularly in districts with student enrollments of less than 25,000.

Research units, then, in the years following 1965, gained new responsibilities, sometimes took on the new designation of evaluation unit, and gained new clients. The federal government, and through the federal government the state government, began imposing demands which the Research and Evaluation units had to respond to in order to assure the continued flow of federal funds to the district.

But, as the history of the activities undertaken by research units

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[11] Mosher, op cit, p. 22.

demonstrates, most of these organizations had neither the knowledge nor the experience of conducting educational program evaluations. Many did have a long history, however, of conducting district-wide testing programs and collecting other kinds of status information. This history, combined with the general absence of a theory and methodology of educational program evaluation, led to a continuation of the data collection kinds of activities which the units were experienced in conducting. Evaluation reports sent to the state and then on to the federal government were generally number-laden reports with little connection to a serious examination of the quality of programs. The governments accepted these reports, and continued to fund local projects as long as any kind of evaluation report was submitted.

Therefore, while Research and Evaluation units had gained new clients to whom they had to respond directly, the clients were imposing some of the same kinds of demands that Superintendents had previously been imposing. This means that the activities of the Research and Evaluation units generally were not much changed from the activities of the earlier Research units.

Some implications

In summary, it seems that a consideration of the implications of client demands for R&E activities begins with an identification of the most directly served clients. The most directly served clients are those who must be served because of the demands they place on the R&E units. These clients might also be labeled the real, or actual, clients, in contrast to the less directly served clients (who may be the clients the R&E units would ideally like to serve).

Historically, because of the demands they placed on Research units,

Superintendents were the most directly served clients. Units have been dependent on their Superintendents for continued funding and support. This dependence, paired with the fact that teachers and other instructional personnel placed very few demands (or even requests) on Research units for service, resulted in the units having virtually no choice but to put top priority on those activities which would fulfill the Superintendent's demands. The demands of Superintendents resulted in Research unit activities which were primarily administratively-oriented. Superintendents asked their research units to produce accurate, timely facts and figures to facilitate their day-to-day management decisions. Those Research units which were able to meet these administrative needs were likely to be judged by the Superintendent to be performing a vital function.

Currently, many Research and Evaluation units may find themselves in the same situation as their precursors. They must respond to the administrative needs of their Superintendents. Additionally, the units today must respond to federal and state mandated evaluation requirements. These externally-imposed requirements, however, are often met through a continuation of the same kinds of activities which are performed to meet district administrative needs, such as the reporting of district-wide norm-referenced test scores. Consequently, governmental demands on R&E units may just perpetuate the administrative, managerial, data collection activities already engaged in by the units.

The ultimate result of client demands on R&E units may be that the units have little discretion over the clients they serve and the kinds of activities in which they engage. Typically, it is likely that instructional clients such as teachers and project directors are less directly served than administrative clients such as Superintendents. Typical unit activities may then generally involve more data collection activities than evaluation activities.

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